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ABSTRACT

This digest offers background information on home schooling and discusses conflicting viewpoints culled from research on the socialization of home-schooled children. The digest first notes the rapidly escalating numbers of children who are being home schooled in the 1990s and comments upon the professionalization of resources offered for parents who home school. The digest then addresses some of the reasons that parents school their children at home. They include: living in areas where schools are not readily available and being anxious about the physical well being of their children in an increasingly more violent school setting. Next the digest discusses current research on socialization of children. Finally, it is pointed out that most experts feel that more research on home schooling and socialization is necessary--that what is available is inconclusive. Contains 8 references. (NKA)

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Home Schooling and Socialization of Children

by Nola Kortner Aiex

Home schooling is defined by Preiss (1989) as "the educational alternative in which parents/guardians assume the primary responsibility for the education of their children." This Digest will offer some background information on home schooling and discuss conflicting viewpoints culled from research on the socialization of home-schooled children.

Rapidly Escalating Numbers

While a Department of Education study in 1990-91 concluded that between 250,000 and 300,000 school-age children were being educated at home, "USA Today" recently cited the Home School Legal Defense Association figures for 1994 as between 750,000 and 1 million—up from only 15,000 in the early '80s (Thomas, 1994). What is the reason for this explosion?

Mayberry (1991) pinpoints the gradual development of the modern state and public education as arenas which attempt to legitimate themselves by embodying the ideologies of many different public segments. She argues that by considering other agencies of socialization (in this case, the church or the family) as arenas which embody ideologies in contradiction to those transmitted by state institutions, the "context surrounding parental choice to home educate gains clearer focus." She stresses that "...the decision to home school (or seek other forms of privatized education) represents a political response by people who perceive a threat in the current organization and content of public education." Thus, the home schooling movement is directly linked to the State's struggle to balance contradictory imperatives (Mayberry, 1991).

Background and Professional Resources

For historical background on home schooling in America, both Bliss (1989) and Aiex (1994) provide enlightening information. Preiss (1989) offers a concise treatment of the legal aspects of home schooling.

With the tremendous growth in numbers of the home schooled, there has been a corresponding growth in the market for home schooling information—indeed, there are now myriad newsletters and books aimed at parents who home school, as well as at least one scholarly newsletter, "Home School Researcher." According to Preiss (1989), "In 1987, in one home-schooling catalog alone, over 300 suppliers of home-schooling materials are listed." With the explosion in home schooling during the past few years, one can only imagine how large the network of professional suppliers of materials is by now.

The granddaddy of all the providers of courses for home study is the venerable Calvert School of Baltimore, which, for many years, was almost the only institution which offered correspondence courses below college level. It was founded in 1906 and has enrolled, through the years, upwards of 360,000 students in its home instruction courses. It has, of course, been joined by other entities in the past decade.

Why Parents Home School

Parents home school for a wide variety of reasons—for example, many parents still live in areas where schools are not readily available (a number of rural areas and some parts of Alaska come to mind), and many parents are anxious about the physical well being of their children in an increasingly more violent school setting. Still others simply feel that they can give their children a better education at home. According to Mayberry (1991), however, two groups of parents home school primarily for ideological reasons: (1) deeply religious parents, and (2) "New Age" parents. Mayberry surveyed 1600 Oregon families who home schooled, receiving a 35% response rate to her questions. Their responses led her to conclude that the two groups cited perceived home schooling as an activity that provided them a way to reproduce their "way-of-life" by controlling the content of their children's education. She reports: "...the meanings and values embodied in public education were not the ones that these parents wanted articulated to their children" (Mayberry, 1991).

Socialization of Children

Does the research show any clear-cut advantages or disadvantages to home schooling, in relation to the social and emotional development of children schooled at home? Does the home-schooled youngster do as well in measures of interpersonal skills and communication skills as the conventionally schooled child?

The stereotypical home-schooled child is often portrayed as being shy, passive, and lethargic because of

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his/her isolation from the normal socialization found in formal schooling. Critics further allege that the self-concept of the home-schooled child suffers from lack of exposure to a more conventional environment (Stough, 1992).

Another socialization-related accusation faced by home educators is that of overprotecting their children from the real world. If this is true, however, at least one researcher (Bliss, 1989) does not consider this to be a serious problem. She argues that "Protection during early, developmental years for purposes of nurturing and growth is evident in many arenas: plant, animal, and aquatic. Why should it be considered wrong or bad in the most vital arena, human development?"

Stough (1992),looking particularly at socialization, compared 30 home-schooling families and 32 conventionally schooling families, families with children 7-14 years of age. According to the findings, children who were schooled at home "gained the necessary skills, knowledge, and attitudes needed to function in society...at a rate similar to that of conventionally schooled children." The researcher found no difference in the self concept of children in the two groups. Stough maintains that "insofar as self concept is a reflector of socialization, it would appear that few home-schooled children are socially deprived, and that there may be sufficient evidence to indicate that some home-schooled children have a higher self concept than conventionally schooled children."

This echoes the findings of Taylor (1987). Using one of the best validated self-concept scales available, Taylor's random sampling of home-schooled children (45,000) found that half of these children scored at or above the 91st percentile—47% higher than the average, conventionally schooled child. He concludes: "Since self concept is considered to be a basic dynamic of positive sociability, this answers the often heard skepticism suggesting that home schoolers are inferior in socialization" (Taylor, 1987).

From the findings of these two studies, it would appear that the concerns expressed by teachers, administrators, and legislators about socialization and home schooling might be unfounded. Indeed, Bliss (1989) contends that it is in the formal educational system's setting that children first experience negative socialization, conformity, and peer pressure. According to her, "This is a setting of large groups, segmented by age, with a variation of authority figures...the individual, with his/her developmental needs, becomes overpowered by the expectations and demand of others—equal in age and equally developmentally needy."

Webb (1989), one of the few researchers who has examined aspects of the adult lives of wholly or partly home-educated people, found that all who had attempted higher education were successful and that their socialization was often better than that of their schooled peers.

More Research Is Needed

At this point, more research on home schooling is necessary—what we have is inconclusive about many of its aspects. Although more and deeper studies are certainly called for, the population to be studied is not readily accessible to researchers. And the types of research that can be done are still limited to case studies of families or to surveys of self-reports by participants.

Notably, the success or failure of the home schooling experience depends inevitably on the success or failure of the family's interpersonal relationships. Home schooling is a complex issue and represents a tremendous commitment on the part of the parents—in most cases, the father must function as the sole breadwinner, and the mother must spend most of her time instructing her children.

For now, we will let Preiss (1989) have the last word. She says: "Because home schooling contains so many diverse and changing factors, each family situation is unique. Yet there exists within the home-schooling community a sense of unity which transcends ideological, political, and religious concerns. That unity lies in the parents' commitment to the education of their children, whose welfare is their primary concern."

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